

## Iran under attack

# Marxists who failed the test

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has been on an offensive to crush the Palestinians and cripple any resistance to Zionist genocide in the region. In attacking Iran, Netanyahu moved against Israel's most significant counterweight and a longtime thorn in US imperialism's side. The US bombing brought its military power to bear behind the assault by its Israeli attack dog. The US attack was intended not only to strengthen its control over the Middle East but also, at a time when the American empire is in decay, to send a message to the world that any resistance will be met with overwhelming force.

On the part of Israel and the US, this was a reactionary war of aggression. It was an extension of Netanyahu's murderous onslaught against Gaza, aimed at giving the Zionist butchers a free hand in the region and disarming and prostrating Iran before the imperialists. Iran, on the other hand, was not fighting to oppress anyone. It waged a just and necessary war to defend the country against attack by the oppressor powers that dominate the region. A victory for Iran would have impeded Israel's slaughter of the Palestinians and weakened the US's and Israeli stranglehold on the Middle East. It would have provided a powerful impetus to struggle for the oppressed around the world, not least for workers in the US.

Now an unstable ceasefire is in force, with all sides claiming victory and none of the underlying conflicts resolved. Israel appears to have inflicted greater damage on Iran, but it did not succeed in knocking Iran out as a regional power. The US made a show of force, seeking to compel Iran to accept a humiliating peace deal that would disarm the country and discredit the regime. But Iran has not capitulated. It inflicted damage on Israel, but it did not change the balance of forces in the region. The situation is at a stalemate.

One thing that is clear is that the workers movement was not a factor in this conflict anywhere in the world. It's telling that the opposition in the MAGA movement had more weight. In Israel and the US, union leaders either supported their own rulers' war or said nothing. What little opposition there was around the world was dominated by pacifism. It is a real sign of weakness that the US imperialists could go to war and the workers movement was nowhere to be seen.

What should Marxists have done to advance the struggle for revolution in these circumstances? It was necessary to fight for the working class to become a factor. In the first instance, this meant taking a correct position on the war. Revolutionary Marxism has always taken a side with oppressed nations against predatory great powers. In the current war, standing for the *victory of Iran* and the *defeat of the US and Israel* was the basic and necessary starting point. This includes defending Iran's right to nuclear weapons, a basic measure of self-defence for oppressed countries. But it was also necessary to fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class, against reliance on BRICS, the Iranian regime or any other capitalist force to fight against imperialism.

The Marxist left overwhelmingly failed this test. Some tendencies, like International Socialist Alternative (ISA), directly capitulated to imperialism by drawing an equal sign between the US and its victim. Others, like the International Communist Tendency, arrived at the same position with ultraleft arguments against siding with any bourgeois state, denying the fundamental distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations. Most Marxist groups were not openly social-chauvinist: they opposed the war and denounced Israel and the US but still refused to defend Iran. Some organisations took the side of Iran while also supporting its reactionary regime.

Around the world, only a few tendencies took a correct position for class-struggle defence of Iran. But most of these did so only on paper. For the working class to emerge as a factor in this situation, it was not enough simply to come to a formally orthodox position. It was necessary to fight to make the labour movement act on this position.

### The tasks of Marxists in Iran

The main argument internationally against defending Iran in the war is that the regime brutally oppresses the population of the country. Obviously this is true. First and foremost, this is a problem for the Iranian left, which makes one of two mistakes on this count. One is to reject the defence of Iran in this war because the regime is reactionary and oppressive and would be strengthened

by a victory. This is a mistake that the communists of the Manjanih organisation make. The defeat of Iran by the US and Zionist Israel would be not just a defeat for the regime but a catastrophic blow to everyone who lives in Iran—just look at what US-engineered regime change meant in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. A US/Zionist victory would put the workers movement in a much worse position to struggle.

Whether or not the victory of Iran would strengthen the regime would depend on the Marxist left itself. What most strengthens Iran's rulers is for leftists to stand by when the country is under attack and do nothing—this leaves the mullahs' regime as the only anti-imperialist force. For leftists to drop their banners and cheer on the regime would indeed strengthen it. To truly undermine the regime, the Marxist left needed to advance its own strategy to defend the country, showing at every step how the reactionary character of the regime was an obstacle to this task.

The Iranian regime derives its authority from its opposition to imperialism and its stance as a defender of the Shia, an oppressed minority in the region as a whole. Since the overthrow of the US puppet the Shah in 1979, the regime has continued to challenge US and Zionist interests. The wave of national unity that swept Iran after the Israeli and US attacks speaks to the depth of this sentiment. By refusing to stand for the defence of Iran, leftists only alienated themselves and were rightly reviled by the masses.

The bankruptcy of this position is most clearly seen when posed concretely. What would it mean for workers in Iran to oppose the war? It would mean that they actively try to stop the Iranian government's military activity, for example, stopping weapons production and transport. This would be a totally reactionary response. It would only help the Israelis and the US to dominate the country. In contrast, in the US and in Israel, workers' action to stop the flow of weapons would be a progressive action.

The second mistake that the Iranian left makes is to drop their opposition to the regime in the war. In fact, it is suicidal to rely on the regime to defend the country, as the period since October 7 shows. Tehran failed to organise a serious opposition as Israel ravaged Gaza and the West Bank, beheaded Hezbollah and invaded Syria. This isolated the country and weakened it in the face of US and Israeli attack.

The reactionary nature of the Iranian regime undermines its opposition to imperialism. Since it is based on the country's elite, calling the impoverished masses into the struggle threatens its material privileges. Its Shia sectarian character alienates women and religious minorities, and its Persian nationalism makes it an enemy to the Kurdish, Baluch and Azeri peoples, who are forcibly retained within Iran. This pushed many Kurdish and women's groups to either support Israel in the war or, like Komala/the Communist Party of Iran and socialist-feminist Frieda Afary, to refuse to defend Iran against attack.

In the current context, Marxists in Iran need to fight to put Persian workers and peasants, women and national and religious minorities in motion to defend the country

based on measures that would strengthen the oppressed. All the best measures to defend the country require a struggle against the regime. Championing the right of the Kurds and other national minorities to form their own separate states is the surest road to building an alliance with Kurdish, Baluch and Azeri fighters who are deeply committed to their peoples' liberation. Demanding an end to state religion and freedom from the veil would undercut the pro-imperialist elements in the women's movement and bring working women into the anti-imperialist struggle. Workers control of the factories and land and debt forgiveness for the peasants would give a tremendous impetus to the country's defence. These measures would be a beacon to the peoples of the Middle East, as well as to workers in the imperialist world.

The Tudeh Party of Iran failed the test on both defence of the country and defence of the oppressed. It wrote declarations calling for the defence of Iran—but also issued a joint statement with the Communist Party of Israel that didn't even take a side in the war but condemned military action and nuclear armament on both sides ("Stop the killing! End the war now!", [solidnet.org](http://solidnet.org), 17 June). Rather than winning the Iranian masses away from the regime, Tudeh ceded leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle to the mullahs. At the same time, Tudeh insisted on defending "the territorial integrity of the homeland", thus capitulating to the Persian-chauvinist regime and upholding the forcible retention of national minorities within Iran. A new course is needed for the Iranian left!

### **Social-chauvinist capitulation in the West**

When the Trump administration waged war on Iran, there was very little opposition in the US. The Democratic Party's main problem with bombing Iran was that it hadn't been properly authorised by Congress. Liberal politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez found common ground with the MAGA opposition, arguing that a costly new "forever war" would jeopardise broader US interests. The leaders of the unions either hailed the bombing—like the ILA's Harold Daggett—or said nothing, like the UAW's Shawn Fain. At bottom, the problem is that all these people support US empire and agree on the need to disarm and subjugate Iran.

The task of revolutionaries in the US in this context was to fight this attack: to stand for the victory of Iran and the defeat of their "own" imperialist rulers. As Lenin explained already during World War I:

"A revolutionary class cannot but wish for the defeat of its government in a reactionary war, and cannot fail to see that the latter's military reverses must facilitate its overthrow...."

"[Socialists] must explain to the masses that they have no other road of salvation except the revolutionary overthrow of their 'own' governments, whose difficulties in the present war must be taken advantage of precisely for that purpose."

—*Socialism and War* (1915)

For the working class to emerge as a factor in this conflict, it was necessary to drive a wedge between the union leaders, liberals and social democrats who support the US-dominated imperialist order and the workers, who are being squeezed to pay the costs for keeping the US boot on the neck of the world.

What did the far left do? International Socialist Alternative wrote:

“The only road forward is one of mass working class struggle against Israeli capitalism and US imperialism, and against the capitalists regimes which exploit and repress workers, women, and oppressed nationalities and minorities throughout the region.”

—“War on Iran escalates as Trump moves towards intervention”, [internationalsocialist.net](http://internationalsocialist.net), 18 June

Behind the unobjectionable platitude that mass working-class struggle is the only solution, the ISA equates the US, the world’s dominant imperialist power, with Iran, a country which has been devastated by US imperialism. The conclusion to this analysis is that the ISA doesn’t take a side.

The ISA goes on with lofty words about the international unity of the working class:

“Working class organizations must come together in struggle across borders and communities to fight for a shared future of freedom from occupation and imperialism, full democratic and national rights, and public democratic ownership and control over wealth and resources.”

The fact is, working-class organisations will never come together “across borders and communities to fight for a shared future”—unless the workers movement in the imperialist countries actively takes a side against their “own” ruling class’s ravages and enslavement in the Global South.

## Pacifist obfuscation

Threatening to drag the Middle East into a regional war, the Israeli and US attacks on Iran came as unwelcome shocks to the rulers of the other imperialist countries in the West and Japan. They issued grandiose declarations for peace, de-escalation and negotiations. But since these lackey imperialist powers are totally dependent on the US for their place at the table, they go running where the US throws the stick. So while initially opposing the Iran war, in the end they hailed Trump’s bombing as an act of “peace”.

In these countries, the pacifist trend in the union leadership and among the liberals reflected the hypocritical posturing of the ruling class. For the imperialists, taking a side with Iran is a red line. The Palestine movement and the protests against the war in Iran were careful not to cross it. What did the far left do in these countries? For the most part, it raised the exact same slogans as the liberals: “Stop the war”, “Hands off Iran” and nuclear disarmament. This obscured the fundamental point that *there was a side* to take.

The Revolutionary Communist International presents itself as totally devoted to the struggle for revolution. So how did it fare in the test of war? After producing a number of lengthy analytical articles that obfuscated what the war was about, ten days after the start of the war the RCI finally produced a statement acknowledging:

“The real purpose of this war is not stability, peace, democracy or the destruction of nuclear weapons. It is about the Israeli ruling class, and its western backers, reserving for themselves the undisputed right to do as they wish in the region: to bully, bomb and invade anyone, anywhere, at any time, without meeting any resistance.”

—“Down with the war on Iran! Down with US imperialism!”, [marxist.com](http://marxist.com), 23 June

From this, they correctly concluded: “The main enemy is at home, and the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed nations is the same as the struggle against the capitalist class in the West.” However, the RCI *still* stopped short of drawing the necessary conclusion from this analysis, ie taking a stand with Iran in the war. It was only on 30 June—almost a week after the ceasefire—that the RCI announced: “Revolutionary communists stand fully on the side of Iran, even though we have no sympathy for the political regime of the ayatollahs, which is a reactionary, anti-working class regime.”

During the whole time the US and Israel were at war, the RCI did not take a side with Iran. This is not an issue of using different language to express the same idea. In the Western countries where the RCI is centred, a wing of the imperialist bourgeoisie sought to use the legitimate pacifist sentiments of the masses to mobilise support for its own predatory interests. To intervene as revolutionaries meant exposing the ruling class’s hypocritical pacifism and showing the masses that the road to peace led through opposing their “own” rulers. This could only mean the victory of Iran and the defeat of the US and Israel.

The RCI’s main slogans during the war were “Hands off Iran” and “Down with the Warmongers”, slogans which swam with the stream of pro-imperialist pacifism, with the trade union officialdom in Britain and with Bernie Sanders and AOC in the US. While the RCI wrote volumes against Trump, Netanyahu and the warmongers, it had nothing to say against the deception of bourgeois pacifism. Adding slogans like “Down with US imperialism” and “Revolution against the billionaire class” did not draw a dividing line, since the demands were totally abstract and had no practical implications. What the RCI did was to create a bridge between the wing of the bourgeoisie that opposed the war and the radical left.

What constituted a revolutionary intervention in the war was not calling for revolution or waving red flags but fighting to break the hold of the supporters of imperialism on the workers movement and to take the Palestinian movement out of the hands of the liberals. The RCI’s intervention in the war was not revolutionary—all it did was muddy the waters.

## The Global South

A decisive defeat of the US-Israeli attack on Iran would have directly advanced the struggle for national liberation across the Global South. Here the task of Marxists was to bring the masses to their feet on this basis. One of the main obstacles to this was the double game played by leaders in the dependent countries. From the Arab world to Latin America, most governments denounced the war. But at the same time, most are closely allied to the American imperialists and barely lifted a finger against the US/Zionist offensive.

Across the Global South, a lot of the left looks to BRICS, which is dominated by these same leaders, to provide an alternative to US domination. If Russia or China had come to the support of their Iranian ally in this war, for example, by protecting Iran under their nuclear umbrellas, this could have decisively impacted



the balance of forces in the region, pushing back Netanyahu's offensive and weakening his regime and also undercutting the US's power. But Putin's Russia and Xi's China did nothing of the kind. Instead, Putin seized the opportunity to expand his reactionary conquest of Ukraine while Xi negotiated new trade deals while promising to not interfere in other countries' affairs.

Both Putin and Xi have refused to take a single step to defend Iran, instead calling for peace, de-escalation and respect for international law. This outright capitulation to US imperialism shows the total impotence of BRICS as an alternative. At every step, this bloc is hamstrung by its leaders' pursuit of their own narrow and reactionary interests, and by their reluctance to alienate the US.

Another example of this faith in the international community is provided by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Reflecting the healthy impulses of the party's base, the CPP insisted:

"People all over the world, including the Filipino people, must stand with the people of Iran, as well as with the Palestinian people, in fighting the US-Israel war machine, as it rampages through the Middle East to force nations to bow to its power, and surrender their freedom...."

"They must resolutely fight against US imperialist wars, and stand firm and united in demanding an end to US military intervention and military presence in the country."

—"Unite and strongly condemn US bombing in Iran",  
22 June

It was correct to call for the masses to come to the aid of Iran by struggling against the imperialists and the Philippine government. However, the CPP undercut this correct call by presenting a false picture of the situation which made it appear that a progressive outcome to the war was possible without the involvement of the masses. It wrote:

"Israel and the US are now increasingly isolated from the international community of nations. From Europe to Asia, there is a unified call for Israel to stop its attacks on Iran. In the face of widespread international and local opposition, Trump is now backpedaling on his planned direct involvement in the war and the dropping of 30,000-pound bombs on Iran."

—"Condemn the US-Israel war of aggression against Iran", 21 June

The day after this article was published, Trump dropped his 30,000-pound bombs. The CPP's mistake was not a simple analytical blunder. The political content of its statement was to pacify the masses instead of pushing their struggle forward, with the illusion that Trump could be forced to back down through pressure from the "international community of nations"—a community made up of the reactionary powers in the West who ultimately supported Trump and the rulers of the Global South who capitulated to him.

Whatever the party leadership says now about mobilising the masses to fight imperialism, their policy going back to their founding has consistently been to support the liberal wing of the Filipino bourgeoisie, who are the most devoted supporters of US imperialism. This strategy has led the anti-imperialist movement to a dead end, in the Philippines and many places in the Global South. To go forward, it is necessary to break the alliance between the masses and the lackeys of imperialism. As the Comintern's 1922 Theses on the Eastern Question laid out, "The oppressed masses can be led to victory

only by a consistent revolutionary line aimed at drawing the broadest masses into active struggle and an unconditional break with all those who seek conciliation with imperialism in order to maintain their own class-rule."

In reacting against parties like the CPP which capitulate to the bourgeoisie in the Global South, a number of tendencies, such as Marxist Forum in Manila, reject the defence of Iran itself as a nationalist capitulation. This puts them in opposition to the correct sentiments of the masses to struggle against imperialism and its Zionist agents. Again, the Comintern Theses insisted: "Any refusal of Communists in the colonies to take part in the struggle against imperialist tyranny, on the excuse of supposed 'defence' of independent class interests, is opportunism of the worst sort that can only discredit the proletarian revolution in the East."

### Centrism vs revolutionary struggle

A small number of tendencies internationally adopted a formally revolutionary position on the war. While we have important differences with the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency, it stands out for fighting for a principled position on the war within the left and workers movement. Most other groups failed to go from abstract commentary to active intervention aimed at reorienting the left and workers movement. The Trotskyist Fraction (TF) is a case in point.

This tendency's initial position was to be neutral on the war, capitulating to imperialism by presenting "Israel, the Iranian regime, the imperialist powers" as equally reactionary ("Israel attacks Iran: The Middle East on the brink of all-out war", [leftvoice.org](http://leftvoice.org), 15 June). It was not until the next day that the TF's French section issued a statement taking a side with Iran.

It is a good thing that TF changed its position and took a side with Iran—that was a progressive step. But what did they do to make this position a reality? So far, their US section has not made any criticisms against the trade union bureaucrats, liberals or leftists who refuse to defend Iran. TF's refusal to fight for defence of Iran in reality rendered that position completely hollow.

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Israel and the US's confrontation with Iran is not over. Nothing has been resolved. More chaos is looming, for the region and the world beyond. In their determination to maintain their weakened empire, the US rulers are turning the screws on the world and their war in Iran is a warning of what's to come. The fact that the workers movement did not act as a factor against the US-Israeli war must be a wake-up call to the Marxist left. It is urgent to learn the lessons—and learn them quickly.

Around the world, a fight is needed to split the workers movement from the pro-imperialist elements and their conciliators. That is the essential precondition for the proletariat to emerge as a revolutionary force. As Lenin insisted in his fight to construct a revolutionary international: "Unity with the social-chauvinists means unity with one's 'own' national bourgeoisie, which exploits other nations; it means splitting the international proletariat" (*Opportunism and the collapse of the Second International*, January 1916). ■